

YEAR OF VICTORY

The year 1945 arrived with bitter cold weather and three inches of snow on the ground. We had a turkey dinner on New Years Day but I missed it because I was working on my plane and lost track of the time. January was to become the nadir of our overseas duty. It was a month of frustration, disappointment and sheer boredom. The problem was the awful Italian winter weather. For most of our scheduled combat missions either the target or our field was socked in. As a consequence, we flew a total of only eight missions during the entire month, most of them against marshalling yards and oil refineries in Austria.

When a mission was cancelled, as was the case most of the time, our Operations people would immediately schedule some sort of practice mission. That meant that we armorers had to go out and drop the bombs we had just loaded the night before. Then, more often than not, the practice mission was scrubbed and that night we had to re-load the same bombs once again. This happened day after day and we became very angry and frustrated about it because there was nothing we could do but follow the orders, however stupid. To be sure, the new crews needed all the practice they could get, but the way things actually worked out only the armorers were getting the practice and we sure as hell didn't need any more experience loading and unloading 500 pound bombs! I wrote in my diary that I was ready to ship out to the Pacific Theater any day the Air Force wanted me to go!.

On 8 January I observed that when our planes returned from a mission to Linz, Austria they were covered with a heavy coating of frost from the -60 F they experienced at bombing altitude. I had never seen that before. On the 12th I received a new plane, # 456. This became the only plane in our Squadron to be given a name by her crew during the previous six months. She was named "Sad Sack". I spent the next three days getting all the armament ready for operations. Sad Sack was to be the last B-24 to which I was assigned - she lasted till the end of the War. On 15 January we lost one of our radar planes when # 055 crashed into a mountain killing the entire crew. Ironically, the plane was on a practice flight and I suppose the radar scanner was designed to look down at targets, rather than ahead.

For most of the month the weather remained uncomfortably cold and we received alternating snow and rain which turned the roads and tent areas into seas of mud. Though we knew what to expect in the winter, and had tried to prepare for the worst, we were still pretty miserable most of the time.

February brought much better, and warmer weather as well as the good news that the Russians were only 45 miles from Berlin. We made up for January with a vengeance and flew a total of 26 missions in February, the greatest monthly total which we achieved during our service in the 15th Air Force. Most of our targets continued to be marshalling yards and oil refineries in Austria, with a smattering of other targets in Germany and Yugoslavia. On the 24th we flew our 200th combat mission.

When the planes returned from Klagenfurt most of the ground crew were formed up near the control tower in a big "200" formation. We held pieces of white cloth or paper over our heads so that the returning air crews could see the number.

On the second of March we flew our 18th consecutive combat mission and by that time none of us were bored from inactivity! We flew a total of 23 missions in March, all but six of them to targets in Austria. It was beginning to look like there were no targets left in Germany. However, even though the Luftwaffe was pretty well out of business, they were still able to put up formidable flak over most targets, especially places like Vienna, Linz, Wels, Weiner Neustadt and Moosbierbaum. On the 23rd we had four planes (including mine) so badly shot up over Vienna that all had to be sent to the 60th Service Squadron for major repairs.

The weather in March was unsettled, as usual, with temperatures ranging from quite chilly to very warm. By the end of the month most of the cold, wet weather was over.

On 13 and 14 March we had marching practice in preparation for the formal presentation of our third Distinguished Unit Citation. About the same time I started to put together a crystal radio set from scrounged parts and a crystal my parents had sent to me. I fiddled with it most of the month in my spare time. Sometimes I received a weak signal from the Armed Forces radio station, but mostly I got just static.

On 2 April we had the formal ceremony at Group Headquarters for presentation of our third D.U.C. (for Markersdorf A/D, Vienna on 23 August '44) by Gen. Twining. Formalities such as this were the exception, rather than the rule, overseas. Generally we lived a life of military informality. On our field we always dressed in fatigues or work coveralls, except when on Guard Duty, where Class A uniform was required. Officers were always treated with the usual courtesy but there was a sort of general understanding that we didn't bother saluting any officer under the rank of Major, except when reporting on specific orders. Even more informality applied to non-commissioned officers. Master-, Technical-, and Staff-Sergeants ("first three graders") worked right along with Privates and Corporals. We mostly thought of ourselves as simply mechanics, armorers, radiomen or whatever and we worked together in harmony, for the most part. Those of us in the lower ranks naturally did what the N.C.O.'s asked us to do, but there was no big deal about it - we didn't quaver in our boots or "snap to". I am sure it was a much different experience from that of the Infantry, for example. When we went to one of the Italian towns we wore class A uniforms, but without ties, when on pass, or fatigues when on some sort of detail. When on pass we saluted all officers, including all foreign officers, as a matter of ordinary military courtesy.

On 5 April we received what was to be our last new B-24. It was # 885, an "M" model, indicating how many major changes that bomber went through during the course of the War, recalling that the first B-24's to fly combat as operational bombers were "D" models.

In early April our Group was ordered to do no more radar bombing over Austrian targets. From then on visibility had to be perfect before bombs could be dropped. Apparently, friendly ground troops were closing in on many of our targets and the Air Force was taking no chances on some sort of "incident".

On 13 April we were all shocked to learn of the death of F.D.R. For many of us he was the only President we had known, since we didn't really count Hoover. He seemed like a permanent National fixture and we couldn't believe he was gone. Mixed with our grief was a great concern over what sort of President Mr. Truman would make. We knew virtually nothing about him and we were afraid he was of the usual Vice Presidential calibre. We truly felt a terrible void that day.

The weather continued to get warmer and by the latter part of the month we were once again having dust storms.

We flew 24 combat missions in April, of which 18 were to targets in northern Italy in support of the Eighth and Fifth Armies. The targets were mostly highway and railway bridges in an effort to impede the withdrawal of Kesselring's forces. As noted previously, these were poor targets to assign to heavy bombers and it was a sure sign that our usefulness, in a strategic sense, had about run its course. On the 24th my plane somehow ran short of fuel on one of these missions and the pilot made a forced landing in what was not much more than a cow pasture north of Pescara. That afternoon the crew chief and I flew up in the new plane, # 885, and landed at a nearby airfield. There we were met by an Army truck which had several drums of aviation fuel aboard. We drove to the emergency landing site and could scarcely believe that the pilot had been able to land on such a small field. While the pilot and crew chief transferred the fuel to the plane, I removed most of the ammunition and eight of the machine guns to reduce weight. The guns, ammo and empty drums were put on the truck and sent back to be loaded on 885, which then flew back to our field.

The three of us, pilot, crew chief and I, walked the full length of the field and back, removing some rocks and a couple logs and looking for any holes or ditches. We found one depression which we marked with a stick and cloth flag. The crew chief helped the pilot start the engines of our plane and then acted as Co-Pilot as I guided them while they taxied to the very end of the field and turned into the wind. I climbed aboard and the bomb bay doors were closed. While almost standing on the brakes the pilot opened all four throttles, then started his takeoff run.

I sat on a jump seat just behind the cockpit and watched as the trees at the far end of the pasture seemed to race towards us. The field was very rough and the landing gear rumbled and shuddered. I was not sure we would make it and for an awful moment wished I had returned on 885. Then, at what must have been the last moment, the heavy vibration ended and we were airborne. I felt one last tremor then saw the ground dropping away from us. We landed at our home field just as the sun was setting. After the plane was parked in its revetment and we had gotten out, we saw what had caused that final tremor. There were tree leaves snagged on one of the main landing gears!

On 25 April we bombed the marshalling yards at Linz and on the following day we hit additional marshalling yards near Sachsenburg, Austria. Though we did not know it at the time, that was to be the last combat mission of the 451st Bombardment Group. That same day we were told we would have a P.O.M. inspection within two weeks. After forty years I cannot remember what P.O.M. stood for but it was a special sort of inspection which was always conducted just before any outfit moved to another location, so we knew a move was coming. At first most of us believed we would be transferred directly to the Pacific Theater. We had all of our personal papers and records reviewed on the 27th and on the following day we had an inspection of all clothing and equipment.

Heavy rains returned on the 28th and 29th and while confined to our tents by the weather I began to sort through all of my things, throwing away anything I didn't want to keep and separating those things I would mail home, rather than carry on my back.

On 30 April we loaded 1000 pound bombs on 12 planes, but removed them the following day when the mission was cancelled. We received news on the first of May of Hitler's suicide and we knew the end had come! On the second of May, to our surprise, we were again ordered to load 1000 pound bombs on 12 planes, but once more the mission was cancelled when we learned that all German troops in northern Italy had surrendered. Those were the last live bombs I handled or saw in World War II.

On 4 May we heard that all German forces on the Western Front had surrendered and on the 7th Admiral Donitz surrendered unconditionally. During this period our planes continued to fly practice gunnery missions. We all had physical examinations on 7 May. The 8th of May was VE Day and our C.O., Maj. McKinnis, spoke to the entire assembled Squadron. We turned in all of our personal arms that day, perhaps for concern that someone would be accidentally shot by a drunken celebrator after the War was over.

On the 9th of May we began to get our planes ready to leave. We removed all the ammunition except for 100 rounds per gun and put a coating of heavy oil on all guns. Two days later we were ordered to remove all the remaining ammo. All the tools and equipment in our armament shop were cleaned, oiled and packed in crates. The rumor started to circulate that we would be going home!

Four of our older planes, 860, 497, 465 and 176 left the field on 12 May - we were not told their destination. I began to ship packages home and was getting bored from the uncertainty and inactivity. The formal P.O.M. inspection was held at Group H.Q. on 14 May and two days later we received official word that we would be returning to the States. A rumor circulated that we were going to a base in New Hampshire to be assigned to the Air Transport Command. I thought that was pretty silly, but it turned out to be fairly accurate. Incredibly, on 17 May we received four brand new B-24's to replace the first four which had left! What on earth were we to do with them? I suppose the pipeline was full of replacement planes and there was nothing for the Air Force to do but make the deliveries which had been planned.

The weather was very hot and dusty by now. For lack of anything else to do, I re-packed my bags for the third time on the 18th. On 21 May we started to tear up the walls and floors of our tents. I took one final pass to Foggia on the 22nd where I sold several cartons of cigarettes for 1500 lire each. Since I didn't smoke I usually traded my monthly quota of cigarettes to other fellows for candy, etc. or sold them in town.

We were placed on a 72 hour shipping alert on 23 May. We finished tearing up all the woodwork in the tents and hauled all the scrap lumber to the supply building. Then we took down all the tents and turned them in. By this time our Italian laborers had constructed several stone buildings around our Squadron area. There were the Officers' and E.M. club buildings, a maintenance garage, a supply building, engineering and armament shops and similar structures. These buildings now became crowded sleeping quarters for the next three nights. I slept in the garage with other armorers.

We were each advised of our individual Reassignment Centers on 24 May. Mine was Camp Atterbury, Indiana. Our barracks and duffel bags were stenciled with our shipment number - 22046-C. That afternoon all of our special vehicles, such as wreckers, weapons carriers, and tankers left for Caserta. By the 25th we had finished all packing and we were ordered to thoroughly police our entire Squadron area. Naturally, the enlisted men also had to clean up the officers' area, which was the worst mess of all! Everything, and I mean every stick and piece of trash, was picked up and hauled to a dump. If our base was any example, the American forces left no mess behind them in Italy and I think that is something to be proud of. All we left behind us were the buildings, which I am sure were put to some good use by the local people.

We left our field at Castelluccio by truck convoy at 1030 on 26 May. We traveled to Bagnoli via Ariano, Benevento, Caserta and Napoli. At every rest stop along the way we were immediately surrounded by a mob of kids in tattered clothing to whom we threw most of our candy and gum. They would surely miss the rich G.I.'s. We arrived at the same camouflaged orphanage complex which we had first been assigned to 18 months before. But what an incredible change! The buildings looked about the same on the outside, except for the new windows, but inside they had undergone a complete metamorphosis. During the intervening months the Army had installed modern latrines, showers and double bunks, as well as a kitchen and mess hall.

On 27 May we had to make out full customs declarations, listing everything we were carrying back to the states. There could be no finer example of federal bureaucracy run amuck! Most of us spent whatever spare time we had at Bagnoli at the nearby Red Cross Service Club where we could actually buy ice cream, get our hair cut, boots shined, etc. We learned that the Empress of Britain and another large troop transport pulled into Napoli harbor on the 28th, and wondered if either transport was ours.

On the 29th, while at the Service Club, I won a drawing which entitled me to a free guided tour of Pompeii that afternoon. Naturally, I

jumped at this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and spent a great afternoon entranced by the sights of this historic Roman ruin. I used up most of the film I had left for my camera. On both the 30th and 31st I and some other fellows took passes into Napoli to see the city and harbor. The city was quite dirty and still showed signs of bombing as compared with Rome, which was comparatively clean and undamaged. There was nothing at all to purchase. Most shops were closed except for places that offered service only.

We were placed on 48 hour shipping alert on 1 June. We had to turn in all of our Lire (invasion currency, as well as any Italian money) for which we received only a credit slip for the equivalent amount in U.S. Dollars. From then on we had no money with which to buy even a candy bar. We finished packing on the second, but our shipping orders were cancelled. Finally, on 4 June, my birthday, we were roused out at 0430, had breakfast, finished our packs and blanket rolls, and were shipped by truck to the wharf area at Napoli. Our troopship was the U.S.S. General Meigs, a two-stacker which was loaded with 6000 troops, mostly 15th Air Force and Fifth Army. We weighed anchor and moved out of the harbor at 1600, having a wonderful final view of incomparable Vesuvius.

I have often been surprised at the number of significant events of World War II which occurred on my birthday, in addition to leaving Italy for home:

- 1940 - Dunkirk fell to Germans. Churchill gave his famous, "We shall fight on the beaches -- we shall never surrender" speech.
- 1941 - Kaiser Wilhelm II died in Holland
- 1942 - Battle of Midway
- 1944 - Rome fell to Allies. "Overlord" convoys left ports in Britain for invasion of Normandy, but were recalled because of worsening weather conditions.

We were assigned to hold A403L of the General Meigs, which was three decks down. The ventilation was poor and it was usually hot and stuffy as well as very crowded. Our meals aboard were generally very good but the chow lines were terribly long. I could not stay on deck at night, as I had on the way to Africa, since everyone was ordered below decks at 2100 each night. The ship traveled at a fast 22 knots and it seemed strange to have no escort and to see our lights blazing at night. We passed Gibraltar at about 2030 the night of 6 June.

The passage home was generally uneventful, even boring at times. From the moment we cleared Napoli harbor until we reached the States, continuous high-stakes poker and blackjack games ran in our hold. I mean they were going night and day. Players came and went but the games never stopped. I didn't play, as they were often betting \$ 50 to \$ 100 on a card, but I often watched in amazement. Since we had no cash they were playing with I.O.U.'s and guys clutched handfuls of slips of paper with various amounts of money with names written on them. One of our armorers, a fellow from Tennessee, had won over \$ 5000 in the first three days. We all urged him to quit and take his winnings, as I am sure it was more money than he had ever seen or heard of before. However, he was hung up on it and by the time we reached the States he

had lost every cent of that and was several hundred dollars in debt. I have often wondered how many of those I.O.U.'s were actually paid off.

The General Meigs had 4" and 5" guns and the Navy gun crews test fired them on three different days. I did not understand why, but I suppose there might have been a German sub out there somewhere which had not gotten the word. The deck guards on the ship were Marines, rather than Army M.P.'s and they were all obviously fresh out of boot camp. One day several of us were standing by the rail amidships when one of the Marine guards, who was particularly impressed by his own assumed importance, ordered us to move forward, away from that area. Two of the fellows in our group were tough old Master-Sergeant crew chiefs, one of whom asked, "What did you say sonny?". The Marine repeated his order and when asked why we should leave he said the area was off limits to soldiers. Someone pointed out there was no "Off Limits" sign anywhere, at which point the Marine started cussing and waving his billy club in the air. One of the Sergeants said, "That does it buddy, over you go!". With that, the two Sergeants each grabbed an arm and a leg and held the Marine spread-eagle face down. Someone else threw his billy overboard, then the Sergeants started counting as they swung the Marine's body back and forth over the rail. The Marine started screaming something and at the count of "three" the Sergeants swung him well out over the rail. I thought for a moment they might actually lose him but they then dumped him in a heap on the deck. The Marine jumped up and dashed down the deck and entered a companionway. We never saw him the rest of the voyage and from that day on we never saw another Marine guard on our deck. When we did see them they were always standing somewhere up on the superstructure.

The weather during the trip varied from hot, sunny days, with the sea almost as calm as a lake, to cold, rainy days with a high chop. The sea was never as rough as we had experienced it on the way to Africa and the big trooper was, of course, much more stable than our Liberty ship had been. In spite of that many men again got seasick as soon as we hit open water and remained so for the entire trip.

On 12 June we sighted our first seaweed and gulls. The next day there were many more gulls and we started packing our gear. On the morning of the 14th we were on deck early to watch for land. About 1030 we sighted the coast of Virginia on the horizon. We had been told we would land at Newport News. A Navy blimp and several aircraft escorted us into the harbor. Everyone had to go below decks while the ship docked. I suppose this was to get the G.I.'s out of the way of the sailors while they were mooring the ship. Afterwards we went up on deck and stood at the rail all afternoon watching real automobiles and whistling at any girl who walked within sight. We had dinner on board then everyone had to go to assigned holds while the unloading process began. The hold was very hot and crowded and our uniforms were wringing wet with perspiration by the time our turn came. It is a wonder some of us didn't pass out from heat exhaustion in that hold.

We got on a train and left for Camp Patrick Henry about 2100. There were many people along the way who waved at us, even at that time of day. We had a welcoming speech by the Camp Commander and then were given the best meal I ever had in the Army. I remember only a very

good steak and all the fresh milk I could drink. I must have drunk at least a quart and a half. We were waited on by German P.O.W.'s, with whom we were not supposed to talk. I did, however, carry on a limited (part German, part English) conversation with the fellow who waited on our table. His name was Werner, I remember, and he was from small village in Bavaria. He had served in the Afrika Korps and was captured near Bizerte. He was very concerned about his family, having had no word from them in over two years.

On 15 June I was issued two new uniforms and new underwear and, after waiting around all day, left by train for Indiana at 2030. The train was the typical dirty, smoky trooptrain with no sleepers. After our fine welcome at Camp Patrick Henry, we had hoped the Army might find a better train for us! We arrived at Camp Atterbury the morning of the 17th and spent all afternoon being "processed", as the Army called it, and were issued two more new uniforms.

This was strictly an Army camp and whenever the troops were expected to do anything, eat, fall out, get up, etc., they blew a bugle over the P.A. system. We hadn't the foggiest notion what all those bugle calls meant so we just lay around in the barracks waiting for something to happen. As a result, we missed several formations the very first day. Finally, in exasperation, some buck Sergeant came into the barracks to find out why we hadn't done this or that. One of our Tech-Sergeants looked up from his cot and said, "Look, fellow, we're Air Force and we only answer to whistles, not your goddamned bugle! When you want us to do something knock on the door, or blow a whistle and tell us what the hell you want!". And it worked! From then on some Corporal always came to the barracks to get us for meals, processing or other duties.

I managed to get all my insignia sewed on my new uniforms, received my back pay from Italy, had my papers all checked and then, on the 18th, was issued my 30 day furlough papers and R.R. ticket home. I took a bus to Indianapolis where I had to spend the night at a hotel, since I missed the last train to Columbus. After changing trains in Columbus and departing in the middle of the night, I finally arrived in Barnesville at 0500 on 20 June. I had not told my parents I was coming home so I caught a taxi to the house.

The first thing I did was open the back door to let out our old Fox Terrier, Jerry. He was so excited to see me again that he couldn't control himself and urinated all over my pantleg. And then I awakened Mother and Dad. I was home from the War.

EPILOGUE

My thirty-day overseas leave passed quickly. It was great to be home but in a way it all seemed very strange. I found that I couldn't sleep on my old bed at all. I finally put a couple quilts and blankets on the floor for padding and slept there, much to Mother's consternation. In Barnesville I visited with friends and relatives and went to see several of my high school teachers, as well as the Principal, Mr. Shepherd. I also met several of my classmates, recently returned from service, and found we had much more in common to talk about than had been the case in school. Barbara came down on the train from Cleveland, where she had a job as a secretary. My Aunt Esther also came down from Cleveland, traveling by bus. We had a couple picnics at nearby lakes and after all the visiting was done Mother, Essie, Barb and I drove to Cleveland to visit with all my friends and relatives in northern Ohio.

On the Fourth of July we went to the "Festival of Freedom" at the Stadium where 82,000 people cheered the program and fireworks display. We also went to the amusement park at Euclid Beach one day. We stayed at Essie's apartment while we visited around Cleveland and then on 11 July Mother and I returned home. Finally, on 19 July my leave time was up and I caught the train back to Camp Atterbury, where I arrived at 1530 on the 20th.

On 21 July I found my name on shipping orders for Maine, to leave the following day. On the 22nd G.I. buses took us to Indianapolis where we boarded a troop sleeper (bunks slung along the sides of a converted coach) at 1900. Our route took us through Pittsburg, Harrisburg, Philadelphia, Trenton and New York. At New Haven we connected with other men from the Group who came up from southern states. We finally arrived at Dow Field, near Bangor, Maine at 1030 on the 24th.

We were told that we would be "screened" at Dow for reassignment. However, Dow Field was an Air Transport Command field and we all were completely dumfounded as to why an experienced Heavy Bombardment Group would be sent to such a place. The War, so far as we knew at that time, was far from over, as Japan was still not defeated. I felt, and I know many of my buddies felt likewise, that we should be receiving transition training on B-29's so that we could do some useful service in the Pacific Theater and help finish the damned War. I was personally ready to go whenever the Air Force could cut my orders. Just what the hell were we doing at a lousy A.T.C. base, anyway??

Of course, we were never given an answer to that question. For the next five days we had absolutely nothing to do, not even any routine Army duty. We wondered if anyone knew we had arrived, even though our Group got a great write-up in the local newspaper. To while away the time we went to the P.X. and the base theater. The town of Bangor seemed completely dead to us, as there was just nothing to do. We walked around the field to look at the transports, but they were not interesting, like bombers. It was a deadly boring interval.

Finally, on 30 July, I had my "screening". Since A.T.C. was not looking for armorers, I was to be assigned either as a photographer or as a photo lab technician. That was fine with me, as long as I had to be part of that outfit. On the same day some of our guys, who had already been screened, were shipped to the field at Presque Isle. On the last day of July we had a 726th Squadron farewell party at a hotel in Bangor. There was a nice chicken dinner, several speeches and dancing later. Since I had never learned to dance, I left early, totally dejected by the final breakup of our Group. I thought it a very sad day.

I was placed on a shipping alert for Presque Isle on 1 August. I didn't particularly want to go there as it had the reputation of being a lousy base, but I was certainly tired of everything at Dow Field. I wanted to get back in a Bomb Group in the worst way, but I could get nowhere when I went to the Orderly Room to ask about re-assignment. It was painfully clear that the Air Force had nothing useful for us to do and was probably only marking time by shuffling us around.

On 3 August several of us hitch-hiked to nearby Green Lake to go swimming and boating. It was a pleasant change of scene.

The first nuclear bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on the sixth. I recall some of us sitting around talking about it, but strangely, I took no note of it in my diary. That is hard for me now to understand. I suppose, like most Americans, we really didn't realize the true significance of the event. We certainly did not comprehend that the anticipation of this awesome weapon was probably the reason the Air Force had decided no more Bomb Groups were needed in the Pacific.

On 8 August the second bomb fell on Nagasaki and on the same day I was shipped to Presque Isle by train. I heard the news after I arrived that afternoon. Clearly the War was almost over and we all knew it was only a matter of time before our Army service was concluded. I began to wonder what I would do. I had no clear idea of what I wanted to do, since I had not given the future much thought. Suddenly everything seemed uncertain and fuzzy. Though many, if not most, men hated the Army and couldn't wait to get home, I had found some aspects of Service rewarding and interesting. Now I was beginning to feel a little lost at the prospect of early discharge.

Though the nights were cool, the days at Presque Isle were surprisingly hot. The first day there I had nothing to do, but on the 10th I learned that I had been classified as a motion picture projectionist, of all things. It seems there were no photography positions open and that was the closest they could come!

I started my new job on 11 August. I quickly learned to operate the two 35mm Simplex projectors and how to switch from one to the other when the cue marks appeared on the screen. For a few days it was sort of fun but after a while the routine became pretty monotonous and I quickly tired I seeing and hearing the same movie a dozen times. My normal routine was to clean up the theater and clean and oil the machines from 0900 to 1030, then show the matinee from 1330 to 1600, and finally the evening shows from 1700 to 2130. The work was not at

all difficult and the hours were reasonable but the schedule broke up the day so badly that I scarcely had any time to myself.

The surrender of Japan came on the 14th and all of us were sort of taken aback that the War was over so much sooner than anyone had expected. I felt deprived to be stuck in a miserable place like Presque Isle, when all the action was in the large cities. There was just no celebration at all on our base. One would have thought that World Wars ended routinely every week or so! Once I went on pass to the town of Presque Isle but thought it such a crummy town that I never went back, though they did have a nice U.S.O.

By this time the Army had developed a "point system" for the orderly discharge of troops. I don't recall exactly how it worked, but a certain number of points were awarded for each Battle Star, for each medal earned, for total time of service and for overseas duty. It was supposed to be an equitable system, but like most Army efforts it didn't work out that way in many cases. Though I had never fired a gun in anger and had never been shot at, I probably had, with ten Battle Stars, three Distinguished Unit Citations and 18 months overseas, far more discharge points than any G.I. from the Fifth or Third Army. On 29 August I went through Pre-separation paperwork checks and on the first of September I packed my gear, said a rather sad farewell to my 726th Squadron buddies who were still at the base (none of whom have I seen since) and boarded a truck for the railway station, to be shipped to Camp Atterbury for discharge.

The troop train of day coaches left Presque Isle at 1745. We changed cars three times during the first day and finally ended up with Pullmans. We were routed via Albany, Cleveland and Columbus and finally reached Camp Atterbury at 2100 on 3 September. We started processing that same night with paperwork checks, and a "shakedown inspection" of our gear. The purpose of this was to check everything we had and to make us turn in any item which was not on the list of clothing we could take with us when released. I had suspected that this was coming and while marching to the inspection area I slipped out of line and tossed several items, such as my canteen, ammo belt, pack, and a couple other items into a culvert, from which I retrieved them later that night after the "shakedown". Unfortunately, my heavy overcoat and raincoat which I wanted to keep were in the bottom of my duffel bag and I just could not get them out. Sure enough, they were taken from me, a fact which still rankles, for all those items were later sold to surplus dealers for next to nothing.

We spent all of 4 September, until nearly midnight, going through separation processing. I shipped a duffel bag of my things home via R.R. Express during the afternoon. We took a final physical and were issued our new discharge clothing. Early the next morning I had my new uniforms altered and my discharge patch - known as the "Ruptured Duck" - sewn on my shirts. There was a final "shakedown", after I had sent my duffel home, and I received my final Army pay and discharge papers.

At 1500 on 5 September I caught a Greyhound bus for home from Indianapolis. About midnight the bus dropped me off at a highway junction

about six miles from home and I walked and hitch-hiked the rest of the way to our house, arriving at 0200 on the sixth of September.

I was home from the Army and the War for good. In many ways the months ahead were a difficult adjustment period. It was not easy to get used to a new, non-regimented routine. I felt strangely foolish in civilian clothes and wore my uniform for most of the 30 day period which was permitted for discharged veterans. I missed my buddies for a long period, as we had shared so many arduous hours and miserable conditions together. Everything seemed strange for many weeks.

I really did not yet know what I wanted to do with my life. My high school principal urged me to enter college right away under the G.I. Bill, but I was still uncertain just what I wanted to specialize in and I needed more time to think. So, at the request of the Lapperts, I once again began working at the studio in Barnesville, as a photographer and lab technician. Though the pay was not much, I enjoyed the work and I continued at it for nearly a year, living at home with Mother and Dad. Then, in the fall of 1946, I entered the College of Engineering at Ohio State University in Columbus and so embarked on another phase of my life.

AFTERTHOUGHTS

In looking back on my Army days after forty years, and especially after writing this personal history, I find myself more and more fascinated with that unique experience. While many of the events I saw and experienced still stand out in stark relief in my mind's eye, many other details seem to be lost in the dusty corridors of memory. I now regret that I did not record those experiences in greater depth in my diaries.

In retrospect I am certain that the Army did its best to care for the servicemen of World War II. Medical care was the best available at the time, consistent with field conditions. I never heard of a case of body lice, the bane of soldiers in all previous wars in history. Food, even in combat areas, was generally adequate and satisfying, even the much maligned K and C field rations. Equipment and weapons, almost without exception, were reliable and dependable and served us well. G.I.s loved to gripe and complain but overall they were better cared for by their government than any other soldiers in history up to that time. My only lasting gripe, after all these years, was the strict officer/enlisted man caste system. Though privilege of rank and discipline are necessary in any military organization, there is no justification for treating enlisted men as social and mental inferiors as was the policy of too many officers.

I have always been, and remain, proud that I was able to serve my country in time of need. During the nearly three years I was in the Army Air Forces I experienced periods of severe physical discomfort, long hours of very hard physical labor, countless examples of military snafus and inefficiencies, and even, at times, pangs of hunger. Yet, interspersed were equally memorable experiences of great pride and excitement, numerous examples of bravery and devotion to duty and stirring scenes which, unfortunately, only war can create. Overall, it was an experience I probably would not trade for any other I can think of, except, perhaps, a trip to Mars. Nor would I wish to go through it ever again!

With the benefit of hindsight one is often tempted to speculate on "what if?". I have often wondered where I would have ended up had I waited until after my high school graduation to enter the Army. There is the possibility, at least, that I might have ended face down in the sand on Omaha Beach. One can never know. Had I been more concerned about my future prospects, I suppose I should have applied for Officer Candidate School, as my interviewers at St. Petersburg wanted me to do. But I have never regretted asking for assignment to a combat group as an enlisted man, for I had no desire to be a "ninety day wonder". I was in good company as a "G.I." and I still take pride in that simple and earthy appellation.

I am especially proud to have served in the 451st Bombardment Group which was the only Heavy Bomb Group to have received three Presidential Unit Citations during all of World War II. And the 726th Squadron was the best of the Group. At the time most of us scarcely realized what an outstanding record our outfit was making but as the years fly past that achievement takes on an ever more satisfying glow.

AN APPRAISAL OF THE ITALIAN CAMPAIGN
(WITH BENEFIT OF HINDSIGHT)

The Allied military actions in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations during World War II have been a matter of interest and disagreement among participants and historians alike for many years. It is a matter of record that the senior American military planners strongly opposed the Operation Torch landings in North Africa and much preferred to husband men and resources for an invasion of Europe in 1943. Britain, by contrast, having very significant economic and political interests in the Mediterranean area, devised and promoted the plan. Ultimately Roosevelt, rejecting the advice of his senior advisors, acceded to Churchill's demands and agreed to the Torch proposal.

Whether or not an Allied invasion of the continent sometime in 1943 would have succeeded is still a matter of conjecture. It is certainly clear that the Normandy invasion beaches would have been far more vulnerable to attack in 1943 than they were in June of 1944. It was in December of 1943 that Rommel first took on his new assignment of planning and constructing fortifications on the most likely landing beaches. Prior to that time the vaunted "Atlantic Wall" was only a figment of Hitler's imagination.

I think it is equally clear that only very limited strategic objectives could reasonably have been expected from Operation Torch. Rommel's Afrika Korps was already in rapid retreat across Libya, a victim of "Ultra" intelligence as well as Montgomery's superior forces. With his supply lines from Italy under constant assault by the R.A.F. and the Royal Navy, it was only a matter of time before Rommel would be forced to concede the contest.

In view of the cost in men and materiel, the most that can be said of the North African campaign is that it was a useful, if costly, battle-field training experience for American infantry and its leaders. Perhaps the painful lessons learned at Kasserine Pass and other bloody fields in Tunisia were ultimately beneficial in preparing Eisenhower and his staff for the greater trials of Operation Overlord.

Once the North African campaign had been launched and the German forces had been defeated in Tunisia, it was virtually certain that the Allies, particularly Britain, would feel impelled to follow up with some further offensive action in the theater. Churchill was obsessed with thoughts of Europe's "soft under-belly", vulnerable to a thrust though Greece or Italy. Subsequent events were to prove beyond any doubt that this soft under-belly simply did not exist, except, perhaps, in southern France, which was the last beachhead of the war.

The choice of Italy, with its convenient Sicilian stepping stone, was as logical as any other point for the next Allied target, assuming another Mediterranean invasion was, in fact, necessary. It is obvious, however, that Italy itself was a bush league opponent. Her army had been chewed to small pieces in Libya and Mussolini had been reduced to a blustering German puppet - a paper tiger without fangs.

Thus, an invasion of Italy could really achieve only two major strategic objectives for the Allies: capture of the excellent airbases around Foggia for use by heavy bombers and the containment and reduction of a very skillful and experienced German army. The cost would be very high.

The invasion of Sicily and Italy was characterized by more command blunders than any other comparable Allied action during the war. The causes were poor planning, miscalculations and, sadly, incompetence at high levels. Compounding these problems were the most rugged terrain and the most severe weather conditions ever encountered by troops of the western Allies anywhere in the European Theater, including the Ardennes Forest. During the winter of 43/44, when the Allies were stalled at the Gustav Line, tanks, trucks and other vehicles were mired in deep mud and forward troops had to be supplied by pack mules. I think it doubtful that combat troops anywhere faced any more severe conditions, even those at Stalingrad. To add to these considerable woes the Allies in Italy faced a very skilled, determined, disciplined and professional German Army under a master defensive commander, Field Marshall Kesselring. The German troops who stood firm before Cassino, especially the First Parachute Division, were certainly some of the finest troops who fought during the war. Even the polyglot nature of the Allied forces in Italy contributed problems unique to that theater. More nationalities fought together in close cooperation in Italy than anywhere else in Europe and the resulting language and cultural differences created numerous and unusual supply and command problems.

Even considering all the above problems over which the Allies had no control, it is distressing to review the several serious blunders which were committed during the Italian campaign and to consider the thousands of lives lost and bodies maimed as the result of carelessness, poor planning and culpable incompetence.

The chain of tactical blunders began at Gela during the invasion of Sicily in July 1943. To bolster forces already ashore, a night drop of troopers from the 82nd Airborne Division was planned. Supposedly, every effort was made to assure success. A specific, narrow corridor was assigned for the transports to fly and each plane carried a special recognition light. But, as so often happens in wartime, someone didn't get the word. As the C-47's approached, American Navy gunners and anti-aircraft gunners ashore took them for Luftwaffe bombers and opened up on them with every available gun. G.I.'s who had already jumped were taken for some sort of diabolical German parachute bomb and dozens were machine-gunned by their buddies while dangling from their 'chutes. When it was all over some 23 C-47's had been shot down and well over 200 paratroopers had been killed. Incredibly, not one officer was cashiered for this debacle. It was the first of several to come.

After Sicily had been taken by the Allies and most of the German troops had escaped to Italy, the question arose as to where and how the invasion of Italy would take place. It is probably unfair to criticize the decisions which were made, with the benefit of four decades of hindsight, but it has always seemed to me that events in

Italy were controlled more by chance and circumstance, rather than by some master plan. By the latter half of 1943 the Mediterranean Theater had become a sort of backwater. Most of the high level planning and the lion's share of materiel and supplies were concentrated on the planned invasion of France. The Mediterranean and Pacific theaters had to make do with what was left over.

The Germans expected that the invasion of Italy would be aimed at a point well up the peninsula, probably north of Rome, in order to split the German forces in two. Rommel, who had command of Wehrmacht forces in the north, was quite certain Eisenhower would land his forces at La Spezia, where the Italian fleet was anchored, and drive across the narrow waist of Italy. Kesselring thought a landing further south was more likely and he was preparing to fight a determined delaying action. Accordingly, the Germans had already decided that they would make their strong stand in the north, along a line from Pisa to Rimini. Through their ability to decode German signals via Ultra, the Allies must have known of these plans. Thus it would seem logical that the landings would have been made at either Gaeta or Anzio and at Pescara (or even at some point above Rome) to cut off the German forces in the south, secure the needed ports at Naples, Bari and Taranto, and gain quick access to the airfields around Foggia. Rommel could not believe that the Allies would think of landing at the toe of the Italian boot and then crawl foot by foot up the peninsula, impeded by terrible roads and nearly impassable mountains and rivers.

And yet that is exactly what they did! On 3 September Montgomery landed his Eighth Army at Reggio di Calabria and six days later Mark Clark's combined American and British forces of the Fifth Army landed at Salerno. The two armies were too far apart to provide any sort of mutual assistance and Montgomery, confronted with bad roads, rugged country and thorough demolition of bridges and other facilities by the Germans, was slowed to a crawl. The Salerno landing was a near disaster. Though it was probably made with inadequate forces - four divisions landed with three held in reserve - the Allies there faced only one German division initially. The odds were thus reasonable but while Clark delayed to tidy things up and bring in his reserves, von Vietinghoff moved swiftly to bring in reinforcements from northern Italy, Albania and Yugoslavia. As a consequence, he very nearly pushed Clark back into the sea. It was a portent of how the bitter Italian campaign would be fought for the next year and a half.

I have always believed that Eisenhower made a very poor choice when he selected Mark Clark as Commander of the Fifth Army. Clark had been on Eisenhower's staff in Africa and apparently was a good staff officer, as Eisenhower noted in "Crusade in Europe". However, history has shown that good staff officers seldom make great field commanders and Clark was no exception to this rule. He was not brilliant or daring, or one to make rapid movements, like Patton. All too often he committed his troops to battle in inadequate strength, under impossible conditions or without proper planning. Like Montgomery, he was too concerned with his own press image. The Italian campaign witnessed numerous examples of Clark's poor leadership.

Near the end of September Eisenhower, bending to Churchill's pressure, decided to press on to Rome, even though Naples had not yet fallen. It is difficult to justify this decision. Rome had no real strategic importance - its capture would serve only political and psychological ends. This decision is even more inexplicable when we compare it with Eisenhower's decision to avoid taking Berlin in the spring of '45. At that time he said the German capital was not a military objective. Perhaps so, but the political consequences of an Allied, rather than Russian, capture of Berlin would have had a profound effect on post-war politics.

Looking back, it seems to me that the Allies' greatest mistake in Italy was the decision to break Kesselring's Gustav, or Winter, Line and press northward to take Rome and later all of northern Italy. By the time the Fifth and Eighth Armies had reached that line in late 1943 they had achieved both major strategic objectives that Italy had to offer. The airfields around Foggia were secure and a powerful, experienced German Army of some twenty divisions was tied down and confined to the mountains of Italy, and thus was not available to contest future Allied landings in France. The Allies had only to maintain pressure on this line to keep Kesselring fully occupied. Had he elected to withdraw up the peninsula the Allies could have advanced to keep him busy. The Luftwaffe was no longer a threat in Italy and with good port facilities at Naples and Bari Alexander was in a fine position to maintain a strong line of position as long as necessary. It should not have been necessary to fight the bitter, grinding and bloody battles at Cassino, the Rapido River, Anzio and hundreds of other locations from mountain to mountain and river to river, for another 800 kilometers. No one can know how many thousands of lives, Allied, German and Italian, might have been saved had we settled for only the southern half of Italy and allowed Kesselring's forces to wither on the vine, while the rest of the Wehrmacht was defeated in Germany.

At about the same time that Eisenhower decided to take Rome, Hitler made a decision to hold the Allies in southern Italy, rather than withdraw back to the Pisa-Rimini line, as previously planned. These decisions ensured that the bitter, no-holds-barred struggle in Italy would go on and on.

By January 1944 Kesselring's Winter Line had thwarted every attempt by Alexander to pierce it. An obvious and promising solution was an end run amphibious landing to out-flank the line to the north. Thus was devised the ill-fated landing at Anzio. The concept was quite sound as MacArthur was to prove brilliantly at Inchon in 1950, under far worse tactical conditions. However, Clark's planning for, and execution of the Anzio landing were fatally flawed. The overall plan called for separate Fifth and Eighth Army attacks against the Winter Line followed by the actual amphibious landing.

The task which Clark assigned to his forces in the west was a forced crossing of the Rapido River and the mission fell to the 36th Division. It was to be his greatest blunder in Italy. The river was incorporated as part of the Gustav line and was heavily defended with carefully emplaced artillery, mortars and machine-guns. The Germans had zeroed-in on every meter of the river. The Rapido was 50 feet wide

and ten feet deep in places and was flowing fast. The flood plain was a mile wide, with no cover. It was winter and bitterly cold, with deep mud everywhere. Since the 36th Division had no cover for the attack and no flank protection it was decided to attack this heavily defended river at night. Any experienced field commander could have predicted a disaster, as did General Walker, commander of the 36th Division. But General Clark ordered the attack to proceed on 20 January. Two days later the disaster was complete with over 1000 men lost and Kesselring still firmly in control of the Rapido River.

With this bloody demonstration that the Winter Line could not easily be breached and with a major element of the attack plan already a failure, one would have expected that Clark would either cancel the Anzio landing or strengthen it enough to be self-sufficient. Instead, he ordered it to proceed on 22 January with only two divisions and a scattering of attached units scheduled to make the landing. It was far too small a force to accomplish its objectives. The landing itself was accomplished without difficulty and the German forces were taken by complete surprise. By noon General Lucas' troops had advanced some three miles inland. But there they stopped and consolidated their position.

Because of Clark's fuzzy orders, Lucas thought his was only a diversionary action, rather than an aggressive attack to outflank the Winter Line. And so, with Clark's apparent concurrence, he spent several days tidying up the beachhead and waiting for more troops and supplies. It was not till the ninth day that he started his drive for the Alban Hills. By then it was too late. Kesselring had moved swiftly to bring up reinforcements from the Winter Line and from north Italy. By the fourth day after the landing he had forged a ring of steel around Lucas. Clark had failed to provide Lucas with adequate armor and when Kesselring was in position to counter-attack he nearly pushed the American forces off the beachhead, into the sea. Only the raw courage of the 45th Division G.I.'s prevented a total disaster. Finally, at Alexander's insistence, Clark relieved Lucas and placed General Truscott in command at Anzio.

It was not enough. The Anzio beachhead was totally surrounded and contained. It ceased to be a real problem for Kesselring. Axis Sally aptly described Anzio as "The largest self-supporting P.O.W. camp in the world." Ultimately, the blame for this fiasco must rest with Clark, who was guilty of poor planning, and who failed to provide adequate troops and armor for the objectives of the landing. Lucas was clearly not the man for the job but even Patton could not have made a silk purse from the sow's ear provided by Clark.

After the Rapido River and Anzio fiascos one would have thought that Field Marshall Alexander would have become sufficiently exasperated with Clark to have relieved him, but he did not. Perhaps it would be expecting too much for a British commander to relieve an American Army commander under the sensitive conditions which then existed. Instead, Clark was promoted to four-star General during his tour in Italy. One cannot but compare this situation with that of General Patton who was almost cashiered for merely slapping a soldier who may well have deserved it. (Even if he did not, the slapping incident was blown up

out of all proportion to its true importance by the press and by Eisenhower himself. Patton slapped one man but Clark, through his blunders, brought about death and injury to thousands of men.)

Without question the most inexcusable tragedy which occurred during the Italian campaign was the bombing of Monte Cassino. I have always been thankful that the 451st Bomb Group did not participate in that ill-advised action on 15 February 1944. We had been assigned another target in Italy that day. To be sure, had we been ordered to bomb the monastery we would have done so - military orders are never optional.

It was the New Zealand commander, General Freyberg, who insisted that Monte Cassino be bombed, for he and his troops were convinced that the Germans were using it as an observation post. There was never a shred of evidence to support that belief. On the contrary, the German officer commanding at Cassino, General von Senger, who was Catholic and a lay brother of the Benedictine Order, was scrupulously correct in his treatment of the monastery. He had assisted the monks in removing most of the ancient treasures from the building and transporting them to Rome for safe keeping and had posted guards at the only entrance to the monastery to prevent any of his troops from entering for any reason. General Clark, to his credit, opposed the bombing but the American commanders of the 12th and 15th Air Forces were enthusiastic - always eager to demonstrate their air power. Finally Field Marshall Alexander approved and the deed was done on 15 February. Some 300 monks and civilian refugees in the building were killed, but not a single German. Even more ironically, once the monastery had been bombed the Germans understandably then felt justified in entering the rubble and using it as a fortress. The follow-up Allied ground attack failed to break the Winter Line and the new German fortress on Monastery Hill resisted every effort to take it for another three months.

A month later, on 15 March, Alexander made another effort to break the Winter Line. In preparation for this new attack bombers of the 12th and 15th Air Forces were ordered to smash the town of Cassino. My Bomb Group, the 451st, participated in this idiotic and fruitless attack. The all-day bombing of Cassino only exacerbated combat conditions for the ground troops. The stone buildings of the town were reduced to rubble which Allied tanks and other vehicles could not penetrate. The German First Parachute Division crawled out of the cellars and held their positions tenaciously and another Allied drive failed miserably. The bombing of Cassino must go down in history along with the bombing of Dresden, Coventry and Caen as among the worst acts of military vandalism perpetrated during World War II. Sadly, Allied commanders didn't even seem to learn from past mistakes. Montgomery's decision to have the R.A.F. unleash its Lancasters against the ancient city of Caen produced exactly the same results as Cassino - an instant fortress of rubble for the German defenders and an impenetrable barrier for Allied tanks.

The Winter Line was finally broken in May when Alexander did what he should have done much sooner. He pulled the Eighth Army in from the stalled Adriatic front, massed it with the Fifth Army and executed a surprise flanking movement around Cassino. Once Kesselring had been

flanked he had no choice but to withdraw from Cassino and its ruined monastery. Initially, the First Parachute Division refused to budge and finally had to be ordered to withdraw by Hitler. Only then did General Anders' Polish troops finally occupy Monte Cassino.

After the Winter Line was breached on 17 May Alexander ordered Clark to break out of Anzio and cut Highway 6 in order to bottle up and capture the retreating German forces. It was a rare opportunity to gain a substantial victory but Clark had at least one more blunder to commit. This time it wasn't a case of incompetence, but one of ambition. He had visions of fame and grandeur. Rome was an ancient capital which had been the prize of many conquerors and Clark wanted to gain that prize first for himself and secondly for the American Fifth Army. He apparently could not abide the thought of allowing the British Eighth Army to reach the Eternal City first. And so, he simply ignored Alexander's orders and drove north to have his picture taken entering Rome. Thus von Vietinghoff's forces escaped and would continue to fight in northern Italy for another year. Clark had clearly been insubordinate in failing to obey Alexander's orders but, unbelievably, he retained his command. I think it one of the great mysteries of World War II. The relatively pointless drive for Rome had cost overall nearly 80,000 Allied and German casualties.

CONCLUSION

Wars are the bitter fruits of political failures. World War II, like all other wars, could have been prevented at the right time and place. The political considerations incorporated in the Treaty of Versailles almost assured that another world conflict would ensue. Yet, in spite of the political failures, the war might have been prevented. While one can never second-guess history it seems at least possible that the western democracies could have clipped the wings of the Japanese militarists in 1931 when they first entered Manchuria. And France, which had the strongest army in the world at the time, could have stopped Hitler in his tracks when he occupied the Reinland in the spring of 1936. By 1938 it was much too late. Hitler had bluffed and won.

War, of course, is often welcome to professional soldiers. For high ranking officers it represents the one opportunity to utilize the training and skills they have spent a lifetime acquiring. It is their one chance for fame, decorations and rapid promotion. Unfortunately, it falls to the citizen-soldier, the volunteer and the conscript, to fight the battles, to bleed and to die. General Heinz Guderian said it well in his book, PANZER LEADER, "Unfortunately, it is not the habit of politicians to appear in conspicuous places when the bullets begin to fly. They prefer to remain in some safe retreat and to let the soldiers carry out 'the continuation of policy by other means'."

Cocoa Beach, Florida - November 1983